



Endocrinology: WebLearn for undergraduates and first-time tutors

The Biomedical Sciences portal collates all student information and links into one easy-to-access area in WebLearn

“WebLearn enables me to customise my teaching materials and resources for diverse groups of students and tutors, to facilitate a deep approach to learning about endocrinology and its relevance in the wider world.”

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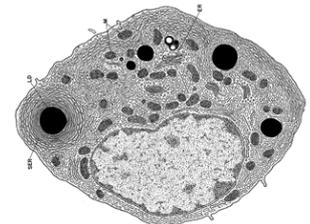
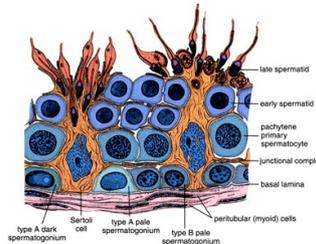
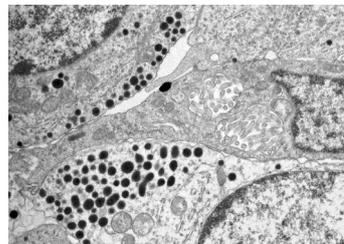


Introduction to the project

The first undergraduates taking the new Biomedical Sciences (BMS) course started their course in October 2011 and entered their second year in October 2012. Students select 5 options from a choice of 19 electives (14 newly created) in the fields of physiology, biochemistry, neuroscience and psychology. As the course organiser for a new option in endocrinology starting in Michaelmas term 2012, Dr Helen Christian designed an integrated set of learning materials and activities in WebLearn. Endocrinology is the study of hormones and their actions in the body. Since hormones influence many body systems at one time, a strong integrative approach in teaching and learning is required.



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The Challenges

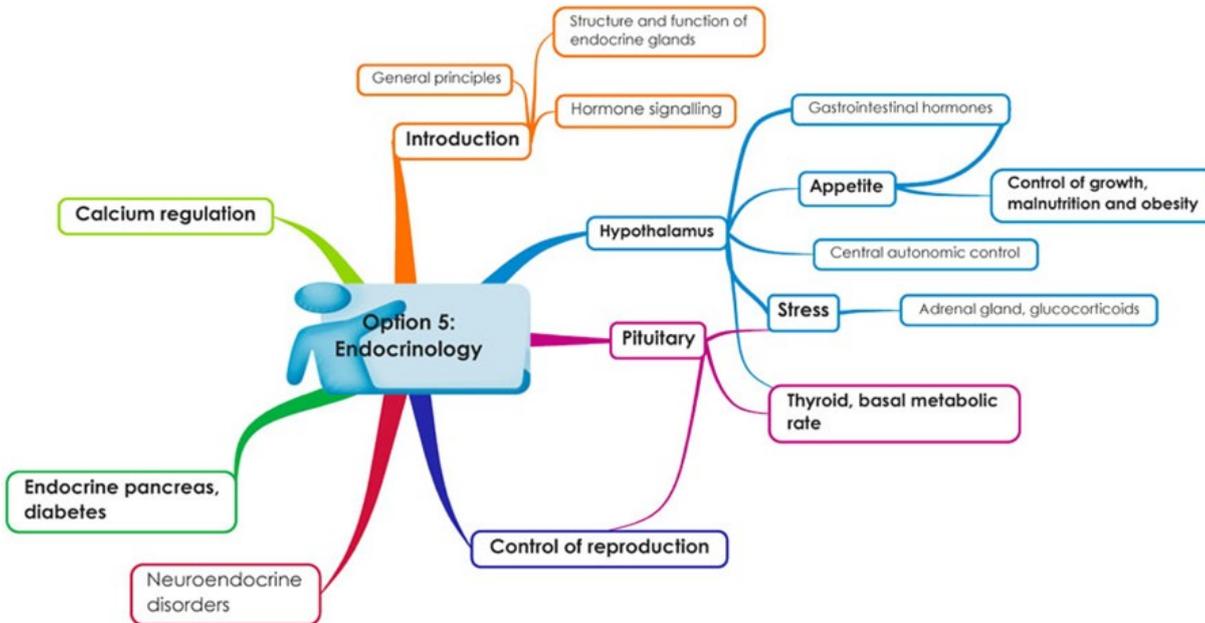
The teaching for the new Endocrinology option comprised a mixture of 1st year and 2nd year Medicine lectures, some BMS-only endocrine lectures and practical classes. Helen had two main concerns:

- Firstly, the BMS students might have the perception that the option was ‘cobbled together’ from existing teaching in Medicine, piggy-backing on lectures directed primarily at the Medicine students, rather than being their own distinct course. In practical terms the BMS students would be significantly outnumbered by 150 Medicine students.
- Secondly, as a new course, there was a need for course tutors to readily find information about the option (only 2 of 6 tutors were lecturing on the course). BMS tutorials were coordinated centrally by the Medicine Faculty and the information for tutors was limited to the term timetable for teaching. There was a broad range of expertise within the tutor group, from first time tutors to experienced tutors tutoring endocrinology for the first time. Helen recognised that there was a need for easily accessible learning resources and information about the option for tutors also.

The challenge therefore was to create a dynamic WebLearn area dedicated to the Endocrinology option for use by BMS students and tutors that went significantly beyond a list of lecture handouts.

The Innovation

The innovation was to generate a WebLearn area stamped with the identity of the BMS Endocrinology option, bringing together the diverse strands of the course to display a coherent, meaningful learning programme filled with valuable learning resources and links. Helen used WebLearn as a virtual area in which the coherence of the BMS course components could be demonstrated in pages dedicated to endocrinology. The pages pool lecture materials (including narrated slideshows for lectures), suggested textbooks and links to PDF files of primary literature resources, films and radio.



Helen makes use of social media and provides a link to her twitter feed dedicated to endocrinology, as well as science related news. The structure is based on the sequence of timetabled teaching. Podcasts created by one group of students about different pituitary hormones were posted. As the students are required to identify potential final honours school (FHS) research project supervisors, and this was causing some anxiety, Helen provided a link to information about FHS projects in endocrinology completed in recent years. Also links to OER provided by the British Endocrine Society and research experience funding opportunities for undergraduates.

Tools used: Three tutors made full use of the WebLearn **Assignments** tool and grading of work using **Turnitin's Grademark** online grading and commenting feature, which was very popular with students and tutors alike. The WebLearn **Survey** tool is used for tutorial evaluations. Although a **Discussion Forum** was a feature of the site the students did not make use of it, probably due to the fact that they are able to conduct face-to-face discussions with their tutor and peers.

Top tips for success of the project:

Student feedback showed that the site had been successful in achieving the aim of providing a valuable on-line environment supporting learning in endocrinology, tailored specifically to the BMS cohort. Students found audio slideshows particularly useful for revision in preparation for exams sat at the start of Trinity term and thought it important that they were posted sometime after the 'live' lecture, not before. Graduate tutors found the materials very useful and it enabled more consistency in tutorial experiences in that the expectations and course content were clear to all from the WebLearn pages.

How could it be improved? The students asked for revision quizzes and all tutorial bookings to be within WebLearn which will be introduced next year. Helen will incorporate Forum contributions as part of a teaching assignment, asking students to nominate/precis an 'endocrine research article of the week' and alert peers to it.

Tip 1: It is very straightforward for course leaders to set up resources in WebLearn – just do it.

Tip 2: At the start of the course advertise the WebLearn facility strongly and use it in teaching as students not in the habit of using WebLearn routinely will not necessarily seek it out.

Tip 3: If in the Medical Sciences Division, seek the support of the MSD Learning Technologies group who are incredibly helpful.

Helen Christian and Jill Fresen, July 2013



<https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk>